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As Terrorism Continues, What Can We Do?

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The hijacking of TWA Flight 847 and its passengers is a travesty that one desperately hopes will not become a larger tragedy. Yet, regrettably, our government is relatively powerless to take effective action beyond negotiations without jeopardizing the lives and safety of the American passengers who remain hostages somewhere in Beirut.

How did the United States find itself in this position, and what, if anything, can and should be done about these acts that put at risk the most valuable assets of our country—our citizens?

First, there is little new in these acts of terrorism presumably performed by zealots willing to give up their lives for a cause. Martyrdom for a purpose has deep historical roots that include causes regarded by our culture as good, as well as evil. What is different today is that large, powerful industrial states are increasingly vulnerable to these types of acts as society offers more and more points of potential leverage to would-be terrorists. Like it or not, we will never be able to protect all of our assets and potential vulnerabilities—whether they be U.S. airlines, merchant ships or Americans traveling abroad—to satisfactory levels of safety.

Further, our political rights, indeed the Constitution itself, are levers that terrorists use against us. The media (even this article) serve in part to provide the forum for terrorists and their propaganda. Media coverage is the terrorist's coin of the realm, and its scope partly defines the success or failure of the terrorists' goals. Beyond that, through media coverage of their acts, terrorists can exert great leverage against countries and leaders, possibly to the extent of causing them to fall. When the "Desert One" raid to rescue U.S. hostages in Iran failed, so did President Jimmy Carter's chances for reelection. *That is leverage.*

So, too, attempts at covert operations, reprisals and even preemptive raids are severely circumscribed by our political and legal systems. It is true justice and fairness when terrorists are extended the advantages of U.S. law in protecting them from U.S. attack. But it is a price of liberty and freedom.

Consequently, we must realize that events like the hijacking of Flight 847 will continue, and probably will expand into other areas that may be more frightening and truly more threatening. Wholesale assassination of Americans abroad is just one possible nightmare.

What should we do? What can we do?

First, in conditions like this one, the elected government should be permitted to get on with the difficult business at hand with limited or muted help from critics. At some stage that condition need not apply. But not at the early stages.

Second, we must have serious public understanding of the need for covert operations, preemptive strikes and retaliation against those who threaten our system and our citizens through acts of terror. These grate against our national character and our system of individual freedoms. Yet without some capability, including an expanded intelligence network to allow these options a chance of success, we will be virtually helpless in future acts of international terrorism.

Finally, and least easy to accept, we must understand that terrorist acts will continue. They are an unwanted and entirely wasteful side effect of a free, prosperous and potentially vulnerable society. This is no solace to hostages, present and future, or to their families. But patience must be a virtue. We have few other choices.

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